

By Aloysious Kasoma

This month, Australia kicked off a storm by rolling out its online safety policy. It is built around the Online Safety Act 2021, which created the eSafety commissioner role.

This role tackles harmful content and cyberbullying. A key rule is that social media platforms must ensure users are at least 16 years old, effective this month.

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube must remove under-16 accounts or face fines up to \$49.5m (about sh175.8b).

As Uganda pushes forward with its digital transformation agenda, safeguarding children online, as is the case with Australia, is also an emerging challenge.

According to experts, Uganda's approach to child online safety must evolve as internet access expands, with more children consuming social media under less guidance. Is it time for Uganda to take the Australian approach?

Godfrey Kuteesa, the founder of the Boy Child Mentorship Programme, agrees that access to social media should have an age limit, cautioning that children are not yet equipped to manage social media.

"We must come up with stringent legislation to protect children before it's too late. If we don't, we may face

ONLINE SAFETY: SHOULD UGANDA ADOPT AUSTRALIA'S APPROACH?

the crisis that the developed countries are grappling with," Isaac Mwesigwa, a parent and school proprietor of Rise and Shine High School, said.

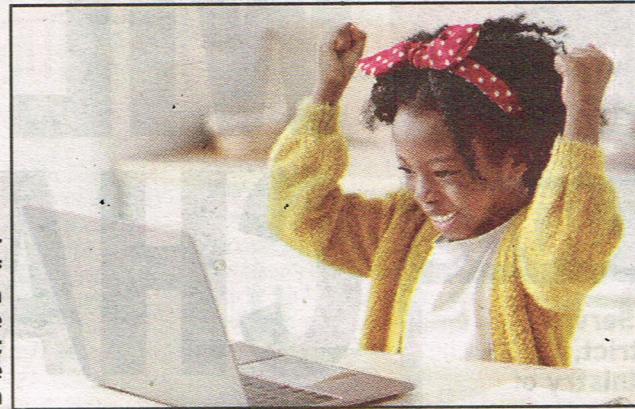
A 2021 survey by Unicef, ECPAT, a global network of civil society organisations, and Interpol found that 40% of Ugandan children aged 12-17 have internet access, with more than half going online daily. However, this access exposes children to a spectrum of dangers, from cyberbullying to predatory behaviour.

Tabitha Suubi, a communications manager at Raising Voices, called for tough regulation to protect children from social media exposure.

Suubi urged parents to monitor behavioural changes, such as sudden withdrawal from social interactions, secretive online habits, anxiety or disrupted sleep.

The Ministry of Education and Sports has taken steps to integrate digital learning safely. In August last year, the First Lady and Minister

Forty per cent of children use the Internet with little regulation



of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni, launched the Digital Agenda Strategy to enhance learning and administrative efficiency in schools through technology.

The strategy also emphasises the need to strengthen legal, regulatory and policy frameworks governing information and communications

technology (ICT) in education. This includes robust content filtering, data security protocols and clear guidelines for safe ICT usage.

Uganda's Digital Agenda Strategy represents a significant step towards modernising the country's education system.

Cybersecurity expert Emmanuel

Keeya stressed the role of technology education in mitigating risks.

"Schools should provide standardised devices with restricted access to harmful content. Awareness and training on safe device usage are crucial for protecting young digital natives," he said.

Patrick Kaboyo, the national secretary of the Federation of Non-State Education Institutions and executive director of the Education Advocacy Network, said the Government should create a policy that regulates the use of social media by children in school and beyond.

"Banning social media for children is possible, but what about at their homes, where parents who would have done that are busy with daily activities to make ends meet?" he said.

Kaboyo said the Government should have programmes to sensitise the public about the pros and cons of children using social media.

Sheikh Shaban Ramadhan Mubaje, the Mufti of Uganda, early this year called on the Government to ban social media, especially TikTok. He said it could lead to significant social unrest if action is not taken swiftly.

"The Government must take this seriously before it gets worse," Mubaje said.

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